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Literary Studies and Self-Determination

In this essay, carrying out work in literary studies is viewed as a creative and individually shaped process whose strength lies not primarily in its methodologically secure analytical competence but in its production of a diversity of critical thought that is subjectively grounded and, furthermore, addressed to a reader – and thus written in anticipation of a reply.

The positive valorization of a subjective approach to literary material is accompanied by a sceptical attitude to the attempt to introduce norms and standards into literary studies in order to qualitatively improve the latter. This scepticism stems from the conviction that standardizations can never be enforced without a loss of

diversity – but diversity is necessary if scholarly chauvinism is to be undermined and new ideas are to emerge beyond the mainstream.

With this thesis, the essay picks up Paul Feyerabend's remarks on the theory of science; with the phrase ›anything goes‹, he called for an acceptance of the idea that innovative engagement with certain problems or phenomena does not necessarily emerge from intentional and scientifically objective consideration but is borne »by a vague urge, by a ›passion‹ (Kierkegaard)«. If spontaneous, seemingly absurd ideas are permitted, that is to say, or if a ›counterinductive‹ approach is taken, results can be obtained that would not have appeared had a rational route been followed. Here, therefore, Feyerabend raises spontaneity, subjectivity, and irrationality to the status of integral parts of the production of knowledge.

A literary studies that draws on Feyerabend can make these ideas productive and free scholarly work from the narrow limits of a self-understanding that is directed toward objective propositional insights, and place the thought of the individual in the foreground instead. With Kierkegaard, moreover, this subjective thought can qualify as artistic thought that feeds on the self's own experiences – a thought that cannot be isolated from actual circumstances in real life, emotions, reading experiences, aesthetic principles, and so on.

Understood in this way, a literary studies anchored in subjectivity would be a literary studies that – without immediately introducing conceptual frameworks and the like to cover its back – seeks out what it was that resulted from contact with a literary text and works what it finds into a self-sufficient textual statement, thus giving to an idea of one's own a form of its own.

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